

Umm Al-Jimal: UNESCO World Heritage Site

Darrell J. Rohl, darrell.rohl@calvin.edu

Associate Professor of Archaeology, Calvin University

Co-Director, Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project



Camels outside the Late Roman “Barracks” at Umm Al-Jimal, Jordan.
Photo by Bert de Vries. Copyright Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project.

Part 1: Mother of Beauty, Mother of Camels

Far out on Jordan’s northeastern plain, black basalt walls rise stark against the sky. From a distance, Umm Al-Jimal doesn’t look like a ruin. Its towers, houses, and churches stand so complete that nineteenth-century travelers compared it to an enchanted city from the *Arabian Nights*—as if its people had been turned to stone and only recently departed. Even today, the impression is uncanny: a desert city frozen in time, waiting for life to return.

But what is this place, and why does it matter?

A Name with Two Meanings

The site’s ancient name is lost, and so we know it only by its modern Arabic name: Umm Al-Jimal (أم الجمال). The meaning depends on how you pronounce a single short vowel that is usually unwritten in Arabic texts: it could be the “Mother of Camels” (أم الجِمال, Umm Al-Jimāl) or the “Mother of Beauty” (أم الجَمال, Umm Al-Jamāl), and the difference is subtle when spoken. Both names are evocative, and both appear in older travel accounts, where Western visitors recorded what they thought they heard from local guides.

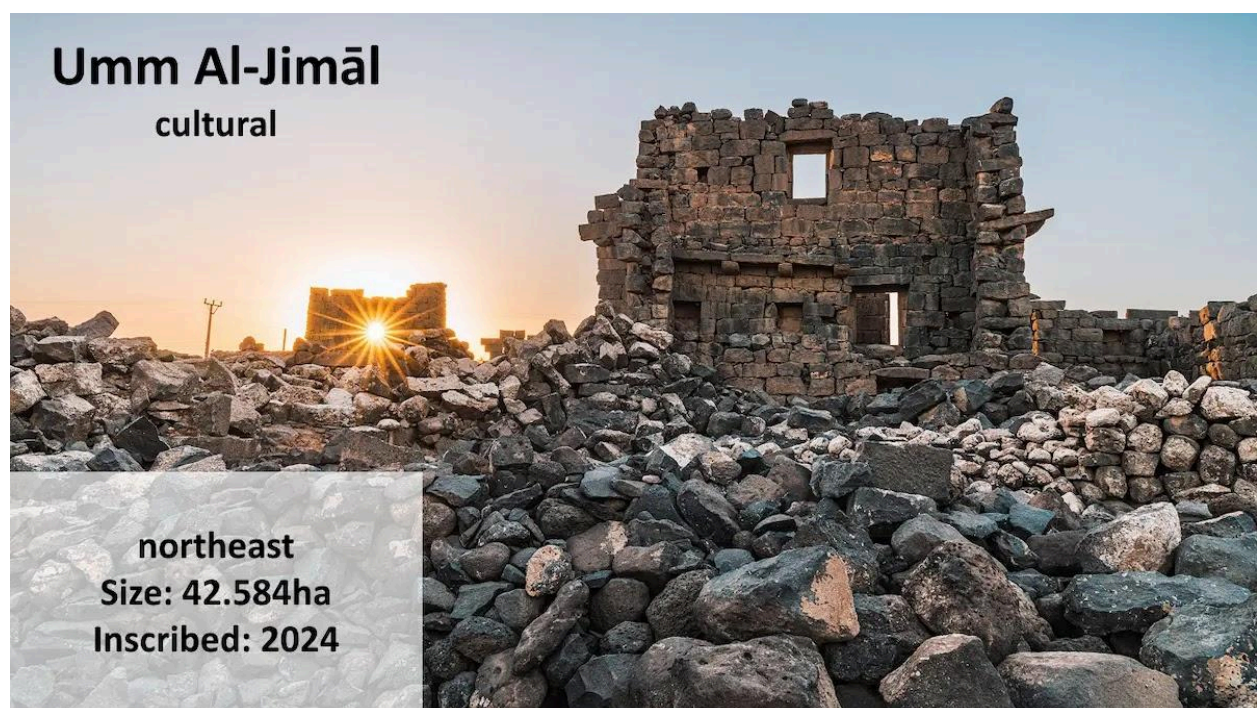
Even now, the site appears in print as “Umm el-Jimal,” “Umm el-Jemal,” “Om Edjemal,” and similar variations. Part of the problem here is that there are different ways to transliterate Arabic into the Roman/Latin alphabet and different systems and choices have been employed to write the site’s name over the past 200+ years. But the official transliteration adopted for Jordan’s 2023 World Heritage nomination is “Umm Al-Jimāl,” and that is the form preferred today (though

I usually simplify by omitting the macron over the final ā, unless I'm writing a very formal and/or official document).

“Mother of Camels” may be the linguistically correct rendering. Yet after several years of working here, I confess a personal preference for the “Mother of Beauty.” It captures not only the striking character of the ruins but also the hospitality and resilience of the modern community that calls this place home.

Jordan's Newest World Heritage Site

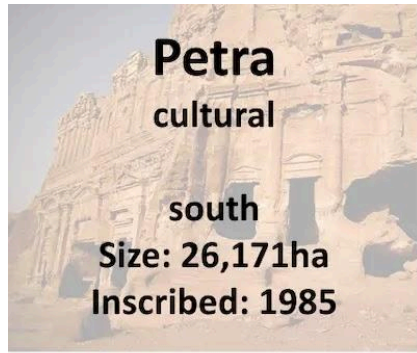
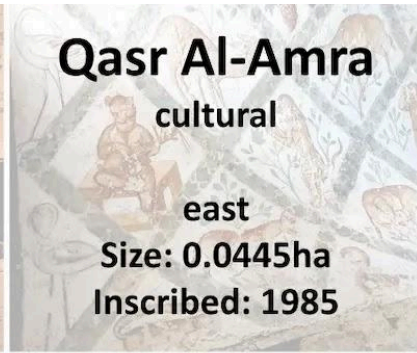
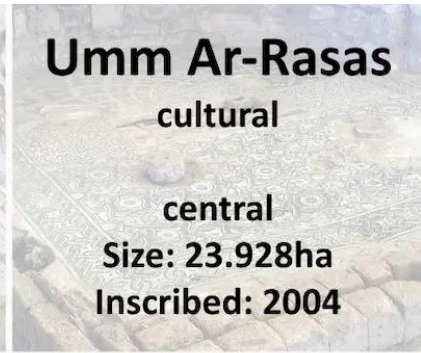
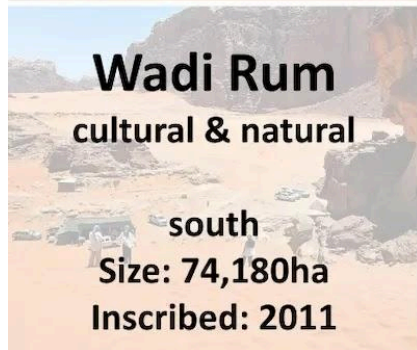
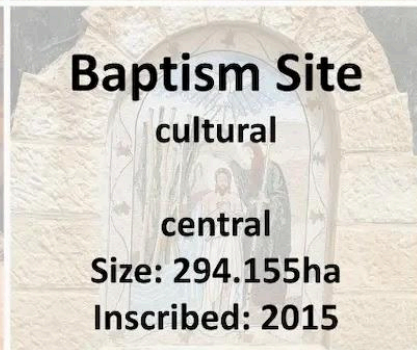

In July 2024, Umm Al-Jimal was officially inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, becoming Jordan's seventh World Heritage Site, and the first in the country's north.



Photograph of domestic architecture at Umm Al-Jimal. By Ali Barqawi, 2021.
Copyright Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project.

The inscribed property is large: it's about half the size of Jerusalem's Old City, and in Jordan nearly double the size of Umm Ar-Rasas, and roughly 80% of Jerash's visitable archaeological park. For Jordan, Umm Al-Jimal fills an important geographical and historical gap, joining Petra, Qasr Al-Amra, Umm Ar-Rasas, Wadi Rum, Bethany Beyond the Jordan (Al-Maghtas), and As-Salt on the country's World Heritage roster.

The inscription recognizes what generations of archaeologists and local residents already knew: that Umm Al-Jimal is among the world's most important and spectacular ancient towns, unmatched for its scale, preservation, and insights into everyday life on the edge of empires.

 <p>Petra cultural south Size: 26,171ha Inscribed: 1985</p>	 <p>Qasr Al-Amra cultural east Size: 0.0445ha Inscribed: 1985</p>	 <p>Umm Ar-Rasas cultural central Size: 23.928ha Inscribed: 2004</p>
 <p>Wadi Rum cultural & natural south Size: 74,180ha Inscribed: 2011</p>	 <p>Baptism Site cultural central Size: 294.155ha Inscribed: 2015</p>	 <p>As-Salt cultural central Size: 24.68ha Inscribed: 2021</p>

Summary details of Jordan's first six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, inscribed 1985–2021.

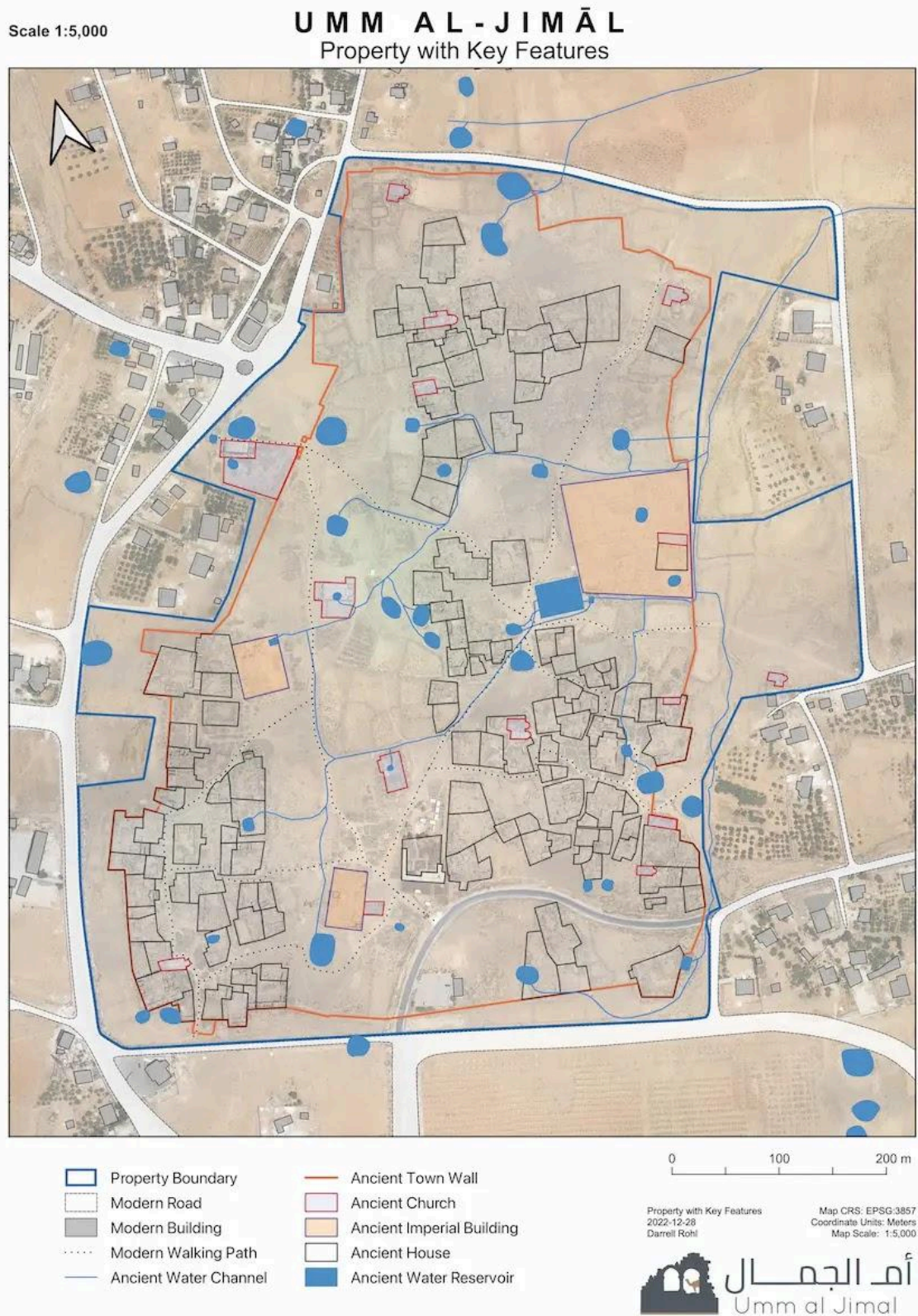
A Town of Houses, Churches, and More

Unlike Petra with its monumental tombs, or Jerash with its colonnaded avenues and theaters, Umm Al-Jimal tells a different story. Here we find not the trappings of imperial glory but the fabric of domestic life and, remarkably, much of it still stands.

Across its 43-hectare walled town, archaeologists have identified:

- More than 170 ruined buildings, including around 150 houses, many still rising two or three stories high.
- Two Roman forts and an imperial administrative building (the “Praetorium”).
- Sixteen early churches, constructed mainly in the sixth century during the Byzantine Emperor Justinian’s empire-wide church-building campaign.
- Three possible mosques, including one adapted from an earlier house.
- A sophisticated water system with more than 30 reservoirs, some of which have been restored, reviving ancient techniques for contemporary desert survival.
- Over 500 Greek and Latin inscriptions, alongside Nabataean, Safaitic, and Arabic texts—making Umm Al-Jimal the richest epigraphic site in northern Jordan.

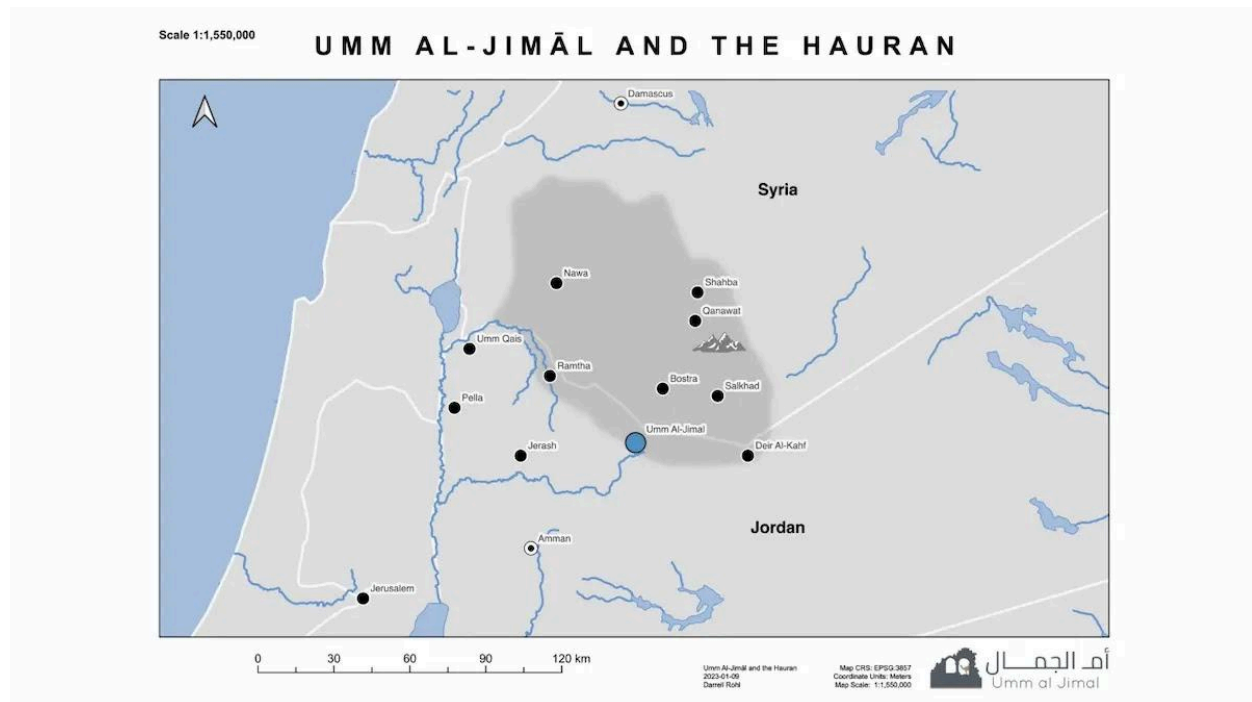
This abundance allows visitors to do something rare: to reconstruct in their minds what the town once looked like, and to imagine the rhythms of ancient daily life. Where Petra dazzles with spectacle, Umm Al-Jimal invites you into kitchens, courtyards, staircases, and doorways: into homes.



Umm Al-Jimal site plan. By Darrell J. Rohl, 2023. Copyright Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project.

The Hauran: A Black-Basalt Landscape

Umm Al-Jimal's distinctive look is owed to its setting in the Hauran, a vast volcanic plateau formed by eruptions from the Jabal Al-Arab (sometimes called the Jabal Al-Druze) extinct volcano in southern Syria. The region's abundant basalt made for an architectural tradition unlike anywhere else in the Roman world: heavy stone beams instead of timber, cantilevered staircases, corbelled arches, and walls so strong that houses could stand three or even four stories.



Map of Umm Al-Jimal's position within the Hauran region. By Darrell J. Rohl, 2023.
Copyright Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project.

Geographically, Umm Al-Jimal sits at the very southern edge of the Hauran, just inside Jordan's borders. This has two important consequences:

- First, the site reflects cultures and communities that transcended modern frontiers. While Umm Al-Jimal is proudly Jordanian today, it also embodies the wider regional identity of the Hauran, straddling the contemporary states of Syria and Jordan.
- Second, its position in Jordan spared it from the devastation of Syria's recent civil war, which tragically destroyed many ancient sites across the border.

This makes Umm Al-Jimal not only the largest but also the most complete surviving Hauranian town.

A Timeline in Stone

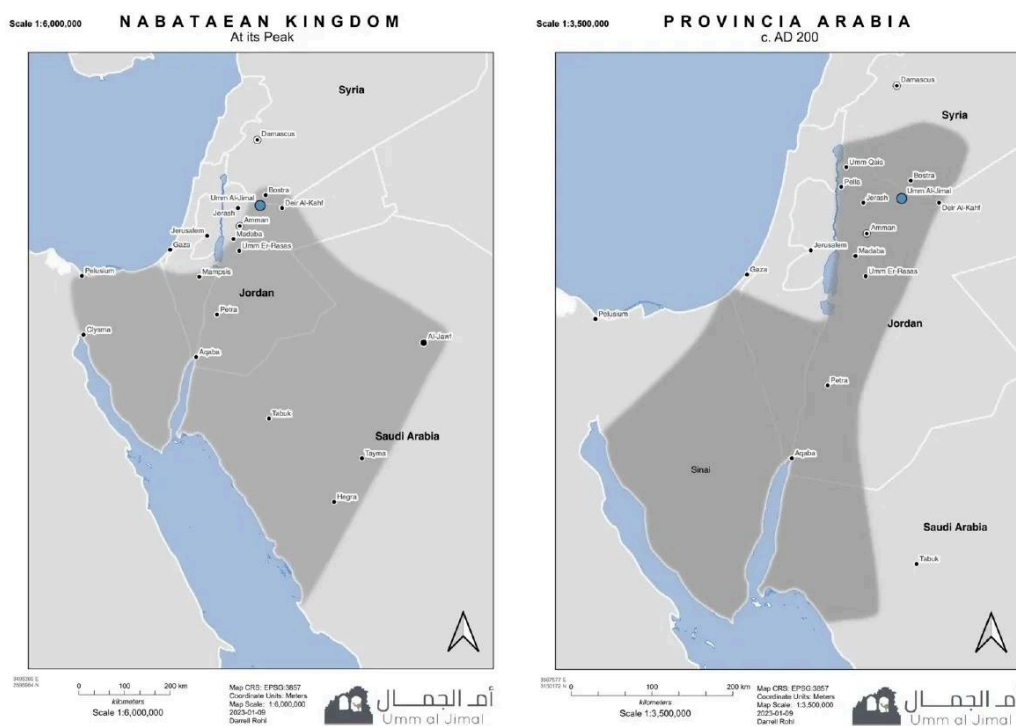
Archaeology shows that Umm Al-Jimal was first settled in the late first century CE by the Nabataeans, whose kingdom is better known for Petra, but had then established a new—or,

perhaps, a secondary—capital at nearby Bostra (now called “Bosra,” just 23 km away in modern-day Syria).



Museum Room 1 panorama, Umm Al-Jimal Interpretive and Hospitality Centre.
By Ali Barqawi, 2021. Copyright Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project.

Its fortunes rose when Rome annexed Nabataea in 106 CE, creating the new province of Arabia, with Bostra as the provincial capital. Proximity to Bostra gave Umm Al-Jimal an outsized role for a rural town. In fact, several of its residents served as council members (*bouletes*) in Bostra, underlining Umm Al-Jimal’s connection to the political life of the province.



Maps showing Al-Jimal’s position within the Nabataean Kingdom (left) and Roman Province of Arabia (right).
By Darrell J. Rohl, 2023. Copyright Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project.

The site expanded under Rome, suffered during Queen Zenobia’s short-lived Palmyrene rebellion in the late third century, and reached its flourishing peak in the Byzantine sixth century, when most of its surviving churches and houses were built. By the end of the eighth century, as

the Abbasid caliphate shifted power east to Baghdad, Umm Al-Jimal was largely abandoned for the next millennium.



Aerial photograph of Umm Al-Jimal's "Early Castellum" and large Roman reservoir.
By Ivan LaBianca, 2014. Copyright Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project.

Yet the story didn't end there. Bedouin tribes used the ruins seasonally for centuries, Druze families settled here in the early twentieth century, and members of the Masa'eid Bedouin tribe pitched their tents among the ancient walls until the 1970s, when the government enclosed the ruins for protection. Today, the modern village of Umm Al-Jimal encircles the ancient one, and the people of the town remain vital stewards of the heritage at their doorstep.

Faith in Daily Life

If Umm Al-Jimal is extraordinary for its architecture, it is just as remarkable for the ways it reveals the interweaving of faith and everyday life.

Sixteen ancient churches have been documented, many squeezed into domestic neighborhoods. Some were public parish churches, others private family chapels, and still others funerary or possibly monastic in function. Several houses preserve crosses and inscriptions carved above doorways or in arches: simple graffiti-like markings that echo John Chrysostom's fourth-century exhortation to integrate faith into all aspects of life and to "make your house a church."

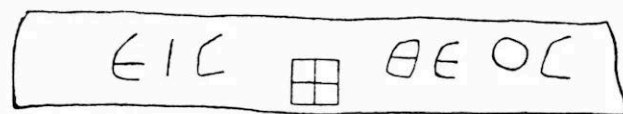


Umm Al-Jimal's sixth-century "Cathedral." Photo by Matthew Neale Dalton (2018); courtesy of Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East (APAAME). APAAME_20181022_MND-0069.

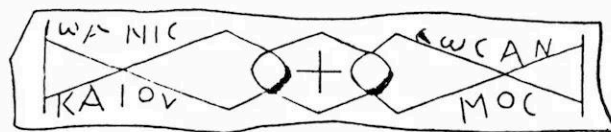
For scholars, these features offer a window into how religion permeated daily life. For visitors, they provide something more immediate: the sense that you are walking not through monuments for elites, but through the homes, prayers, and memories of ordinary people.



House VII:
Alpha & Omega



House VI: "One God"



House 40: "Ioanis, Sosana, Kaioumos"



House 55: "Kaioumos"

Evidence of domestic Christianity in the inscriptions and sculpted crosses of Umm Al-Jimal's Byzantine homes. Photo by Darrell J. Rohl, 2023. Inscription drawings by Littman, 1913.

Preservation and Partnership

Over the past fifty years, the Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project (UJAP) has documented the town's architecture, inscriptions, cemeteries, and water systems. Under the leadership of the

late Bert de Vries and now a new generation of scholars, the project has embraced “community archaeology,” working closely with the modern residents of Umm Al-Jimal to ensure that the site’s benefits are shared. It is my great privilege and honor to be a part of this new generation, serving as Co-Director and Director of Excavations.

And this community partnership was vital to the UNESCO nomination. Supported by Jordan’s Department of Antiquities, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the Umm Al-Jimal Municipality, and international partners, the nomination succeeded because it combined world-class scholarship with engaged local stewardship.

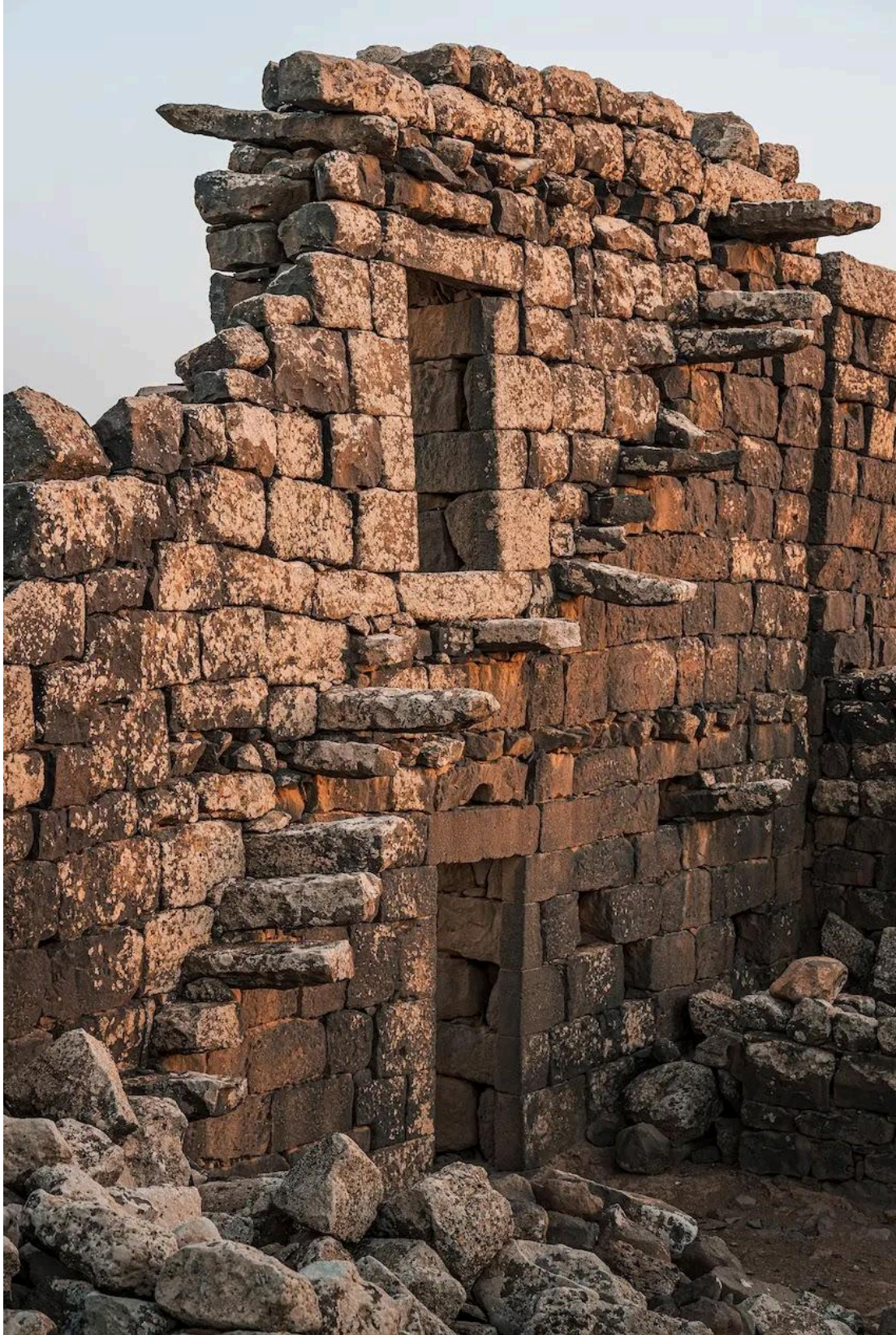
In 2024, UNESCO and ICOMOS recognized the site’s “Outstanding Universal Value,” enhancing its protection for future generations.

Why Visit Umm Al-Jimal?

Because nowhere else in Jordan—or the Roman/Byzantine Near East—can you explore an entire town so intact. Walk through its gates, climb its staircases, and step into its courtyards, and you’re entering a place that still speaks. Jordan is absolutely worth a visit, for several reasons:

- If you want to **marvel at Nabataean artistry**, you go to **Petra**.
- If you want **Roman theaters, temples, and colonnades**, you go to **Jerash**.
- If you want **dazzling mosaics**, you go to **Madaba** or **Umm Ar-Rasas**.
- If you want a **deeply spiritual experience**—to stand **where Jesus was baptized** and to walk in the footsteps of prophets and pilgrims—you go to the Baptism Site at **Bethany Beyond the Jordan**.
- But if you want to know **how people actually lived**—in houses, neighborhoods, and communities—you go to **Umm Al-Jimal**.

It is, quite simply, the **Mother of Beauty**.



Two series of cantilevered stairs, reaching the third floor of a Byzantine period house.
By Ali Barqawi, 2021. Copyright Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project.

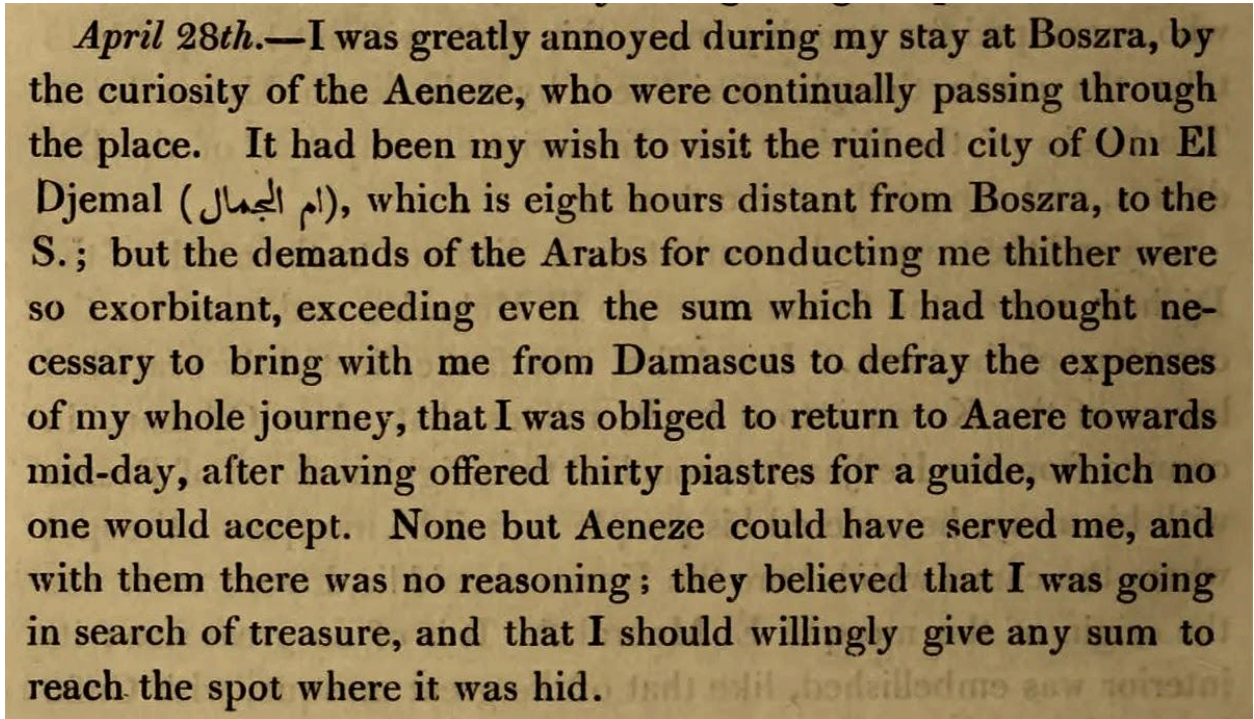
Part 2: Adventurers, Antiquarians, and Arabian Nights

On Jordan's northeastern plain, Umm Al-Jimal rises like a black city of stone. For centuries, its towers and courtyards stood quietly among the basalt fields, known to shepherds and Bedouin but largely invisible to the outside world. That began to change in the early nineteenth century, when European travelers—hungry for biblical discoveries, ancient ruins, and adventure—set their sights on the Hauran.

The result was not a neat line of rediscovery but a tangle of missed attempts, rivalries, lawsuits, and legends. Before archaeologists arrived with cameras and measuring tapes, Umm Al-Jimal lived in the Western imagination as an enchanted city, a bandit's fortress, or even a cavern of treasure guarded by serpents and giant figures.

Burckhardt: The Explorer Who Missed It

The first outsider to bring Umm Al-Jimal to European attention was Johann Ludwig (John Lewis) Burckhardt, a Swiss traveler working under British patronage and better known today for “rediscovering” Petra in 1812. Disguised as a Muslim trader, Burckhardt spent years crisscrossing the Levant, recording sites and gathering intelligence. Twice he tried to reach Umm Al-Jimal—first in 1810, then again in 1812—but both times he failed.



April 28th.—I was greatly annoyed during my stay at Boszra, by the curiosity of the Aeneze, who were continually passing through the place. It had been my wish to visit the ruined city of Om El Djemal (ام الجمال), which is eight hours distant from Boszra, to the S.; but the demands of the Arabs for conducting me thither were so exorbitant, exceeding even the sum which I had thought necessary to bring with me from Damascus to defray the expenses of my whole journey, that I was obliged to return to Aaere towards mid-day, after having offered thirty piastres for a guide, which no one would accept. None but Aeneze could have served me, and with them there was no reasoning; they believed that I was going in search of treasure, and that I should willingly give any sum to reach the spot where it was hid.

Burckhardt's account of his failed attempt to visit Umm Al-Jimal in April, 1812.

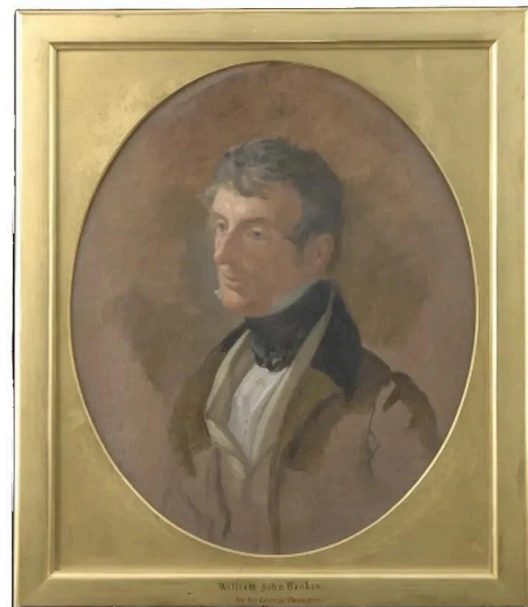
Why? Local guides demanded outrageous sums to lead him there. They suspected he was seeking hidden treasure and refused to believe that he would pay only for curiosity. Burckhardt recorded his frustration: after offering thirty piastres, he had to turn back, the Bedouin insisting

that nothing less than a small fortune would suffice. To the tribes who controlled the plain, Umm Al-Jimal was no harmless curiosity but a place that stirred suspicion and guarded secrets.

Still, Burckhardt carried news of the site with him. And in Cairo, around 1815–16 after his Petra visit had made him famous, Burckhardt met two young British travelers—James Silk Buckingham and William John Banks—to whom he spoke of this mysterious black-stone city he had failed to reach. In that moment, the torch of Umm Al-Jimal's story passed to another generation. It's easy to imagine that these two young men envisioned their own future glory if they could accomplish what Burckhardt could not.

Buckingham and Banks: Companions, Rivals, and a Courtroom Battle

Buckingham and Banks were very different men. Buckingham, self-taught and ambitious, was a restless traveler who made his living from publishing accounts of his journeys. Banks was wealthy, scholarly, and eccentric, an antiquarian with deep classical learning and a taste for collecting. For a short time, the two traveled together before reaching the Hauran, accompanied by Giovanni Finati, an Italian adventurer who had converted to Islam and who had accompanied Banks from Cairo.



Left: Miniature portrait of James Silk Buckingham by John Jukes (1816). Sold at Christies Auction House, June 2008.
Right: Portrait of William John Banks by Sir George Hayter (circa 1833). National Trust Collections, Kingston Lacy.

But their paths soon diverged. In 1816, Buckingham reached Bosra, where he heard stories of Umm Al-Jimal. He wrote of a ruined city, uninhabited but large, with the remains of a Christian church and many houses. He also noted that the Bani Sakhr tribe of Bedouins used the site as a stronghold for their raids in the region, painting it as a dangerous place even to approach. Yet he never went there himself: his knowledge was second-hand, a tale passed along by locals.

These adventurers would briefly meet up again in Damascus—where they shared stories and information gathered on their separate travels—before yet again setting out in different directions.

Bankes, meanwhile, returned to the Hauran two years later, this time without Buckingham or Finati. In 1818, he did what the others had not: he walked among Umm Al-Jimal's ruins. He copied twelve Greek and Latin inscriptions, leaving behind the earliest known Western record of the site. But Bankes never published his findings.

The relationship between the two men dissolved into acrimony. Bankes accused Buckingham of stealing from his notes (possibly during their shared time in Damascus). Buckingham denied it. Their feud ended up in the British courts, where Buckingham sued for libel and, in 1826, won £400 in damages. For Bankes, it was a humiliating defeat. It may be that this loss, and the fear of further controversy, kept Bankes from ever publishing his careful observations. His notes remained hidden in private archives for generations.

Because of this silence, the credit for Umm Al-Jimal's "first discovery" drifted elsewhere. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was thought that the earliest visitor was Cyril Graham in 1857. Only in the 1990s, when Bankes' notebooks were studied and published, did scholars realize that he—not Graham—had been the first Westerner to walk the streets of Umm Al-Jimal.

Graham's *Arabian Nights*

If Bankes' visit was forgotten, Cyril Graham's was anything but. Traveling through the Hauran in 1857, Graham produced one of the most famous descriptions of Umm Al-Jimal ever written. He spoke of the challenges of reaching the site: bandits on the plain, Druze-Bedouin tensions, and the exorbitant sums demanded for safe passage, which he bargained down from one thousand piastres to four hundred. And then he described what he saw:

This is, perhaps, among the most perfect of the old cities which I saw... so perfect was every street, every house, every room, that I could almost have fancied, as I was wandering alone in this city of the dead—seeing all perfect, and yet not hearing a sound—that I had come upon one of those enchanted places that one reads of in the *Arabian Nights*, where the population of a whole city had been petrified for a century.

Graham's words captured imaginations. They turned Umm Al-Jimal into an enchanted ruin, a city of silence and mystery, a place belonging as much to fantasy as to history. He also speculated that the ruins might be biblical Beth Gamul, mentioned in Jeremiah 48: a connection now rejected by modern scholarship but long repeated in secondary sources. For more than a century, Graham was remembered as the site's first Western visitor: a reputation he did not actually deserve, but one that his evocative prose ensured.

Merrill's Detailed Observations and Preservation Warning

Two decades later, Umm Al-Jimal received another kind of attention. Selah Merrill, an American Congregationalist minister, early archaeologist, and later U.S. consul in Jerusalem, visited the site in 1875. His account offers the most detailed nineteenth-century description of the ruins: he measured parts of the town, described its characteristic multi-storey basalt houses clustered around shared courtyards, noted inscriptions and pottery, and even remarked on the mixture of Roman and Byzantine architectural features. Yet the most striking element of Merrill's account is his growing awareness that the site was in danger.

During his visit, Merrill noticed men dismantling the ruins. Long basalt beams were being pried from the houses and loaded onto camels, carried off to build elsewhere. He worried that inscriptions could be lost forever, carted away one block at a time. "As many as six men were at work while we were there," he wrote, "throwing down the walls and getting the long roof-stones."

This was something new. Where earlier visitors had seen enchanted cities or romantic ruins, Merrill combined careful measurement with concern for preservation. His attention to detail—and his warning about ongoing stone-robbing—mark the first clear step toward an archaeological sensibility: an awareness that ruins could be studied systematically and needed protection. Merrill, in this way, was a bridge between the romantics of the mid-nineteenth century and the scientific archaeologists who would arrive in the twentieth.

Ewing's Campfire Tale

By the century's end, Umm Al-Jimal had acquired a mythology all its own. In 1895, the American missionary William Ewing wrote down a story he said he heard from Bedouin guides around a campfire: beneath the ruins of Umm Al-Jimal lay a cavern of treasure, hidden by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself, and guarded by forty giant figures, an enormous camel, and a vast serpent whose description reminded Ewing of the biblical Leviathan.

This story reads like folklore and fable, but it is telling. It reveals how Umm Al-Jimal's blackened walls inspired awe, suspicion, and the imagination of both locals and outsiders. It also reflects a pattern that is frustratingly familiar to archaeologists working in the region: ruins across Jordan and Syria are often wrapped in treasure legends, their stones and silence inviting stories of hidden wealth and even supernatural guardians.

From Fantasy to Science

By the dawn of the twentieth century, Umm Al-Jimal had been framed as many things:

- A site too dangerous and suspicious to reach, as in Burckhardt's frustrated attempts.
- A place entangled in the story of personal rivalry and courtroom battles in the travels of Buckingham and Bankes.
- An enchanted city—and an early but mistaken biblical identification (Beth Gamul)—in Graham's haunting description.
- The emergence of real detail and a preservation warning in Merrill's anxious report.

- A treasure-guarded cavern in Ewing's campfire tale.

Each account reveals more about the travelers and their times than about the town itself. What none of them captured was the true significance of Umm Al-Jimal: a lived-in city of farmers, soldiers, traders, and families whose homes and churches still stand.

That more accurate picture began in the early 1900s, when Howard Crosby Butler and the Princeton Expedition arrived with cameras, plane tables, and trained epigraphers. They would replace myth with measurement and romantic tales with systematic study. Their story marks the next stage of Umm Al-Jimal's rediscovery.

Part 3: Princeton Expedition to UNESCO World Heritage Site

When nineteenth-century travelers wrote about Umm Al-Jimal, they conjured an enchanted city of basalt; silent, mysterious, biblical, legendary, and perhaps even cursed. By the dawn of the twentieth century, however, the age of romantic travel writing was giving way to something new. Cameras complemented sketchbooks, measuring tapes and theodolites replaced rifles, and questions of treasure and legend yielded to those of architecture, chronology, and preservation.

The story of Umm Al-Jimal's modern archaeology begins here: with surveyors and epigraphers from Princeton University who traded campfire tales for contour lines, and ends—at least for now—with its inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2024.

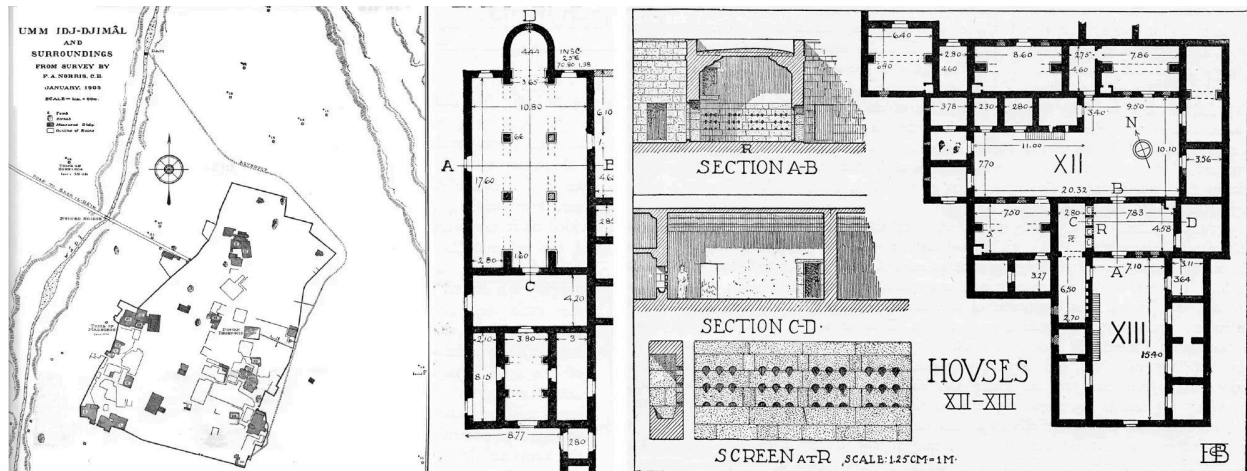
The Princeton Expedition

In 1905, Howard Crosby Butler and a team from Princeton University set out to document the antiquities of southern Syria and northern Jordan. Their Princeton Expedition to Syria visited Umm Al-Jimal twice, in 1905 and 1909, as part of a sweeping survey of the Hauran.

Butler opened his report with a passage that could easily have been written by Cyril Graham half a century earlier:

Far out in the desert, in the midst of a rolling plain, beside the dry bed of an ancient stream, there is a deserted city... The walls of the ancient deserted city, its half-ruined gates, the towers and arches of its churches, the two and three-storey walls of its mansions, all of basalt, rise black and forbidding from the grey of the plain. Many of the buildings have fallen in ruins, but many others preserve their ancient form in such wonderful completeness, that, to the traveller approaching them from across the plain... the deserted ruin appears like a living city, all of black, rising from a grey-white sea.

The tone is both poetic and precise—a bridge between the enchanted city of the nineteenth-century imagination and the measured plans of modern archaeology.



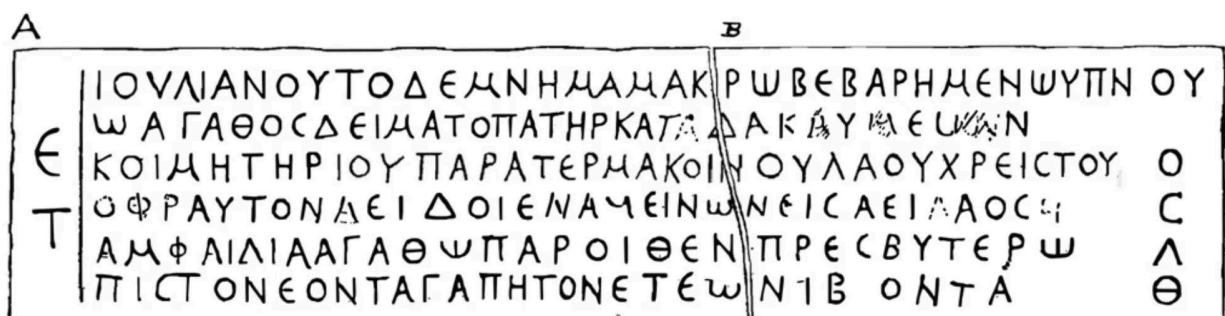
Examples of the Princeton Expedition's documentation at Umm Al-Jimal, including the first site plan (left), a plan of the Southwest Church (middle), and a plan and sectional views of the House XII-XIII complex (right).

At Umm Al-Jimal they recorded:

- The first measured plan of the town—twenty houses, several churches, and the most visible Roman and Byzantine structures.
- Hundreds of Greek, Latin, and Semitic inscriptions, including the now-famous Julianos inscription.
- A photographic archive that remains an irreplaceable record of the site before modern disturbance including an earthquake in the 1920s.

Butler's work was groundbreaking: a deliberate attempt to map rather than romanticize. His plans turned the "black city" into a dataset: an object of study, not legend. Yet it was also selective. Butler focused on major monuments and inscriptions, largely ignoring ordinary domestic architecture and stratigraphy. His aim was to document the site's most significant features, not to dig or provide a comprehensive account.

Even so, the Princeton Expedition marked a decisive turn from myth to measurement. It anchored Umm Al-Jimal in academic geography and made it visible to the wider archaeological world.



The Julianos Inscription from Umm Al-Jimal. Enno Littman (1913), *Syria: Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904–1905 and 1909. Div. III, Sect. A, Part 3 Umm Idj-Djimal, no. 262.*

Gertrude Bell and the Early Twentieth Century

Among the others who came in this period was Gertrude Bell, who visited in 1905 on her remarkable journeys through the Levant. Her photographs, now preserved in the Newcastle University archive, show arches, towers, and staircases that have since collapsed, quietly capturing details that no longer survive. As she recorded her first glimpse of the site, she expressed amazement at “its black towers and walls standing so prominently in the desert that it was hard to believe it had been abandoned for over thirteen centuries.”



Photograph of Druze men within the ruins of Umm Al-Jimal, by Gertrude Bell, 14 February 1905.
Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, GB/3/1/2/2/11.

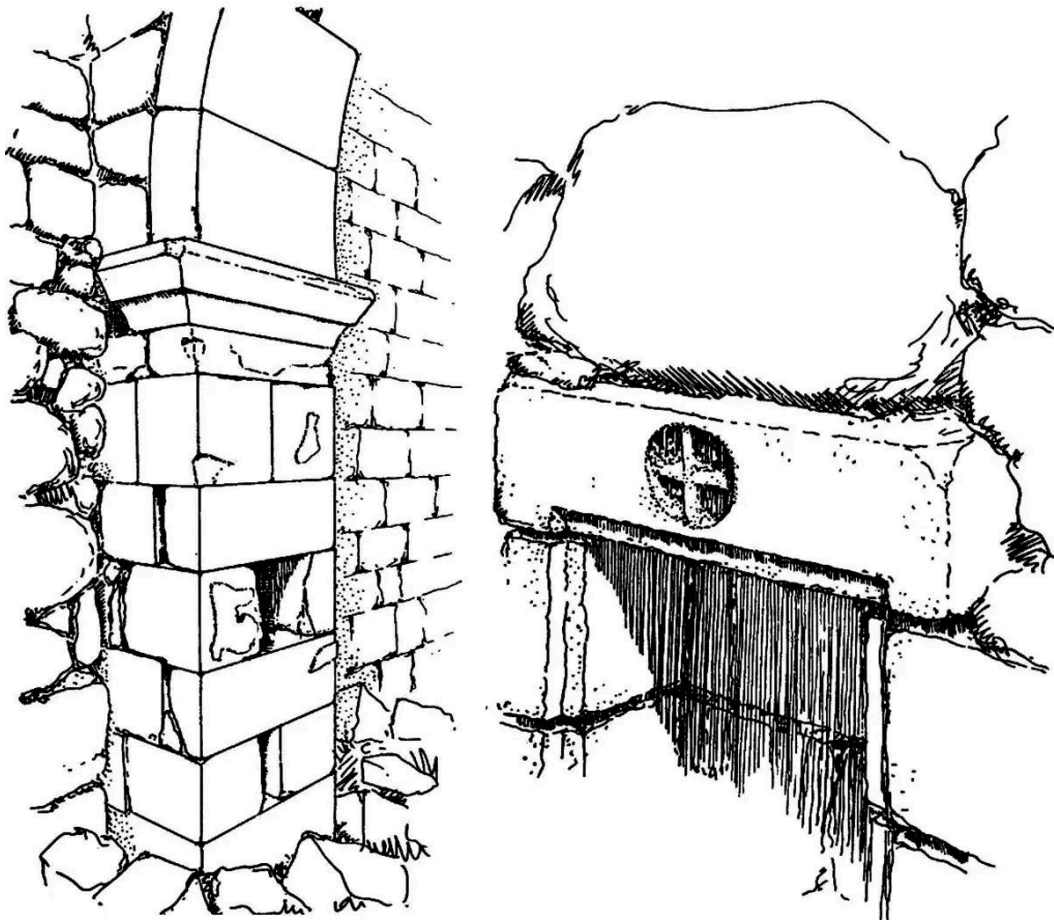
Bell’s visit, and others like it, kept Umm Al-Jimal in scholarly awareness during the decades after Princeton, but it would be decades before additional fieldwork was done. Political instability, limited resources, and shifting archaeological priorities meant that the site once again slipped into silence—waiting nearly half a century for the next major intervention.

Corbett and Reynolds: Excavating the Julianos Church

That silence ended in the mid-1950s, when C. Corbett and P. A. Reynolds undertook the first planned, stratigraphically recorded archaeological excavation ever carried out at Umm Al-Jimal.

Their focus was the Julianos Church, a hall church near the town's northwest corner that had drawn attention because of an inscription discovered by Butler's team half a century earlier.

That Julianos inscription, dated 344 CE (year 239 in the era of Bostra), had led some scholars to proclaim Umm Al-Jimal's Julianos Church "the earliest church in the world with a dated inscription." The claim was carefully phrased: it did not intend to suggest that the church itself was the earliest ever built, only that of all known ancient churches, none possessed an inscription with an earlier date.



Two drawings from Corbett's publication: south pier of the Julianos Church nave cross-arch (left), sculpted lintel and recessed cupboard in the church's north wall (right).

Corbett's careful excavation challenged this interpretation. His team documented clear evidence that the inscription was not found *in situ*, but had been reused in the church's masonry. Stratigraphic relationships and associated pottery pointed instead to a later construction date, probably in the early part or middle of the fifth century.

Corbett concluded that the famous inscription was almost certainly a reused tombstone, not a building dedication, and that it could not be used to directly date the church. The revelation was

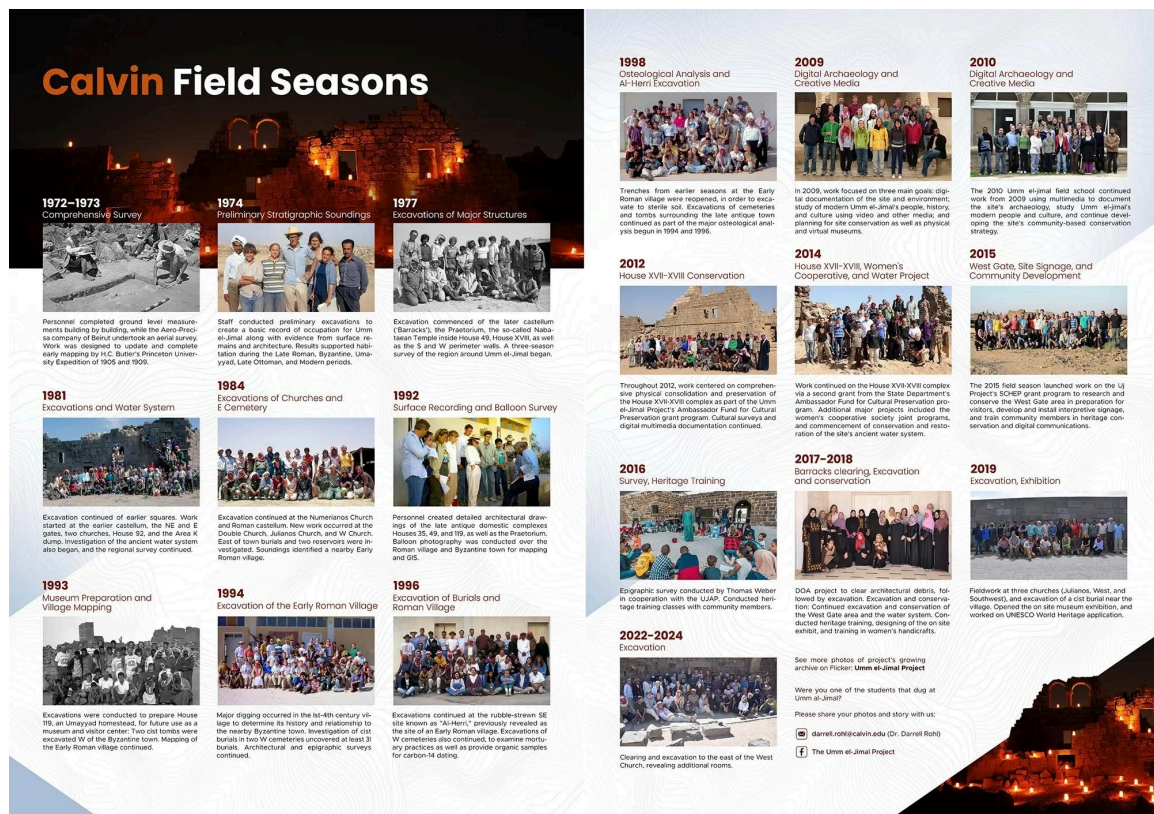
significant: it corrected a cherished assumption and replaced speculative dating with stratigraphic reasoning.

Unfortunately, Princeton's influential publications had already entrenched the 344 date in the broader literature. Even today, occasional articles still repeat it. But among specialists more familiar with the site's bibliography, Corbett's correction has stood firm for more than seventy years—a testament to how new evidence can overturn even the most confident claims (but also how difficult it can be to overcome entrenched interpretations!).

Beyond the debate over dates, Corbett and Reynolds' work was a milestone in method. Their excavation introduced modern archaeological technique to Umm Al-Jimal—grids, stratigraphic recording, and attention to material context—bridging the gap between early architectural survey and the scientific programs that would follow.

The Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project

The next great chapter opened in 1972, when Bert de Vries of Calvin University (then "Calvin College") founded the Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project (UJAP). De Vries built on Princeton's foundations but brought an entirely new vision: long-term, interdisciplinary, and deeply engaged with the living community.



Overview of Calvin University/Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project (UJAP) seasons, 1972–2024. Image by Open Hand Studios for November 2024 exhibit and UNESCO World Heritage celebration at Calvin University.

Over the past five decades, UJAP has (among other accomplishments not noted here):

- Conducted detailed architectural and topographical surveys, identifying over 170 buildings.
- Excavated houses, churches, reservoirs, and towers, revealing the texture of everyday life in Late Antiquity.
- Catalogued hundreds of inscriptions and artifacts, reconstructing patterns of trade and faith.
- Developed heritage management plans and visitor facilities that serve both scholarship and tourism.

De Vries emphasized what he called “the archaeology of the ordinary”: the study of domestic architecture and daily life. His approach made Umm Al-Jimal a case study in how provincial towns flourished on the margins of empires.

Equally important was the project’s partnership with the modern town. Local residents were trained and employed as excavators, conservators, and guides; their voices shaped interpretation and UJAP has sponsored and supported several local community members through related graduate research. This community-based archaeology has since become a model for other heritage projects in Jordan.

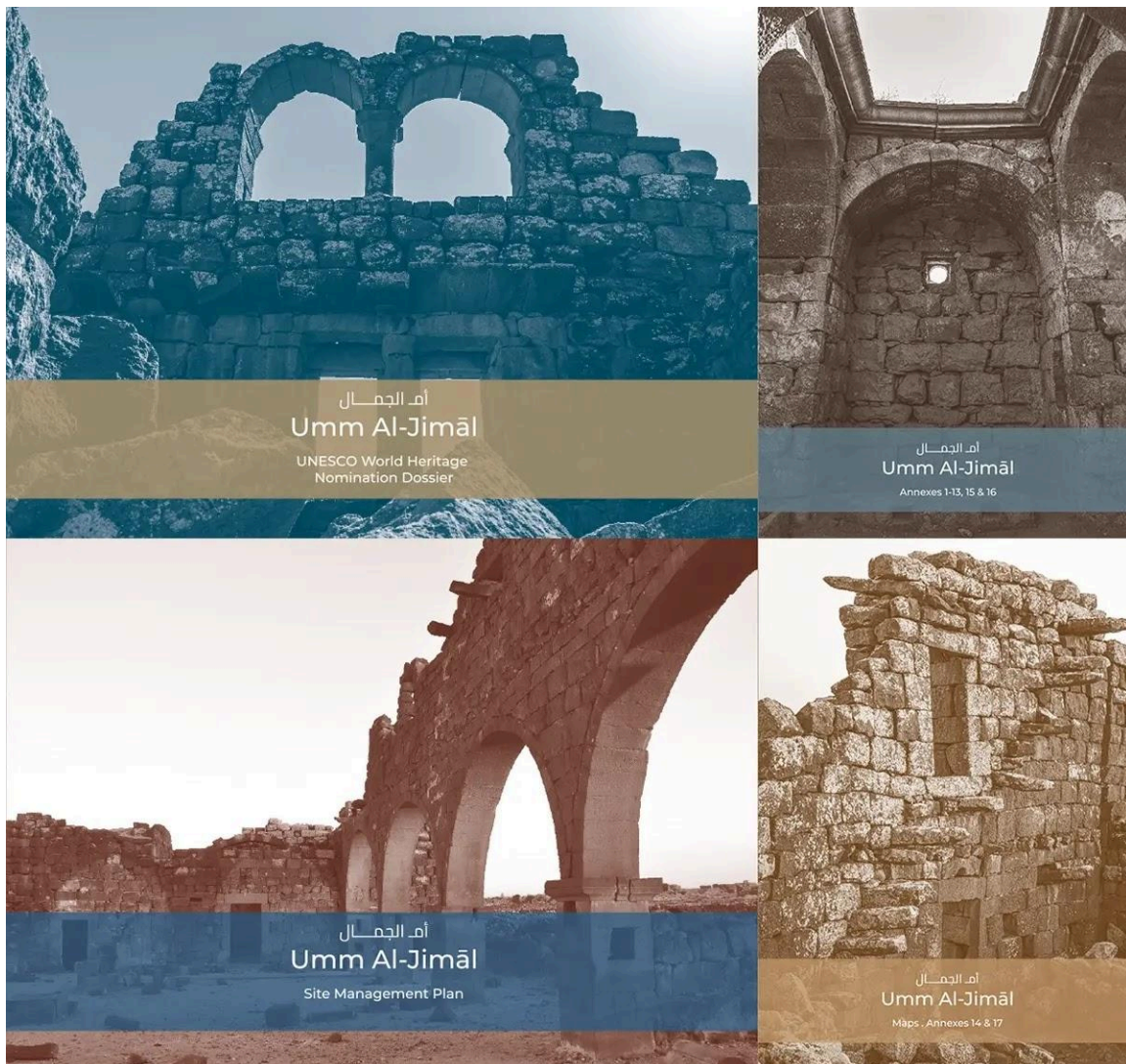


Summary of modern activity and UJAP's community-centered approach. Image by Open Hand Studios for November 2024 exhibit and UNESCO World Heritage celebration at Calvin University.

I joined the Umm Al-Jimal Archaeological Project in 2018 and have been Co-Director, along with my colleagues Dr. Elizabeth Osinga and Jenna de Vries Morton, since Bert's unexpected passing in March 2021.

From Research to Recognition

By the early twenty-first century, Umm Al-Jimal was no longer a “lost city” but a vibrant example of integrated heritage practice. Digital documentation, 3-D LiDAR scanning, and GIS mapping—much of it developed under recent research programs—are turning the site into one of the best-recorded ancient towns in the Middle East.



The four volumes of the Umm Al-Jimal UNESCO World Heritage Site nomination dossier, prepared by UJAP Co-Directors Dr. Elizabeth A. Osinga, Jenna de Vries Morton, and Dr. Darrell J. Rohl on behalf of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and under the supervision of the Department of Antiquities. Submitted to UNESCO January 2023.

These efforts, together with decades of collaboration among the Department of Antiquities, the Umm Al-Jimal Municipality, and international partners, culminated in July 2024, when Umm Al-Jimal was officially inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

It became Jordan's seventh site on the list—and the first in the country's north—recognized for its Outstanding Universal Value as the best-preserved Late Antique town in the basalt Hauran and for its ongoing role as a living community.

Where Burckhardt once failed to reach a city of rumor and danger, the people of Umm Al-Jimal now welcomed the world to a city of knowledge and pride.

Conclusion: The Long (and continuing) Rediscovery

Across two centuries, Umm Al-Jimal's story traces the evolution of archaeology itself:

- In the early 1800s, Burckhardt, Buckingham, and Bankes pursued rumor through risk.
- In the later nineteenth century, Graham and Ewing romanticized and mythologized; Merrill sought out details and sowed the seeds of preservation concerns.
- Butler's Princeton team turned observation into survey and gave us the first detailed documentation.
- Corbett and Reynolds brought excavation and correction.
- De Vries and the UJAP team he built have greatly expanded knowledge and made archaeology collaborative and community-based.
- UNESCO sealed recognition that Umm Al-Jimal's past and present are inseparable and worth protecting for generations to come.

What began as a "petrified city" has become a living heritage shared by scholars, residents, and visitors alike—a testament to endurance, rediscovery, and the quiet persistence of the past.

Further Reading

- Bell, G.L., 1907. *Syria: The Desert and the Sown*. William Heinemann, London.
- Bowsher, J.M.C., 1997. An Early Nineteenth Century Account of Jerash and the Decapolis: the Records of William John Bankes. *Levant* 29, 227–246. <https://doi.org/10.1179/lev.1997.29.1.227>
- Buckingham, J.S., 1825. *Travels Among the Arab Tribes Inhabiting the Countries East of Syria and Palestine*. Longman, Hust, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, London.
- Burckhardt, J.L., 1822. *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land*. John Murray, London.
- Butler, H.C., 1913. Ancient Architecture in Syria. 72: Umm Idj-Djimâl (Thantia?), in: *Syria: Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904-1905 and 1909*. Brill, Leiden, pp. 149–213.
- Butler, H.C., Ward, C., Littmann, E., Norris, F.A., Garrett, R., Prentice, W.K., 1899–1905. American and Princeton Expeditions to Syria. *Howard Crosby Butler Archive*, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University. <https://collections.visualresources.princeton.edu/Detail/collections/56>

Rohl (2025) Umm Al-Jimal: UNESCO World Heritage Site
<https://darrellrohl.com/tag/umm-al-jimal/>

- Corbett, G.U.S., 1957. Investigations at “Julianos’ Church” at Umm-el-Jemal. *Papers of the British School at Rome* 25, 39–66.
- de Vries, B. (Ed.), 1998. *Umm el-Jimal: A Frontier Town and its Landscape in Northern Jordan. Volume 1: Fieldwork 1972–1981*, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series. Journal of Roman Archaeology, Portsmouth, RI.
- Ewing, W., 1895. A Journey in the Hauran. *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 27, 60-67, 161-184, 281-294, 355-368.
- Graham, C.C., 1858. Explorations in the Desert East of the Hauran and in the Ancient Land of Bashan. *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 28, 226–263.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1798322>
- Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Osinga, E.A., de Vries Morton, J., Rohl, D.J., 2023. *Umm Al-Jimāl: UNESCO World Heritage Nomination and Site Management Plan*. Department of Antiquities of Jordan, Amman.
- Merrill, S., 1881. Um el Jemal, the “Mother of the Camel,” in: *East of the Jordan: A Record of Travel and Observation in the Countries of Moab, Gilead, and Bashan During the Years 1875–1877*. Scribner, New York, pp. 78–87.
- Osinga, E.A., 2017. *The Countryside in Context: Stratigraphic and Ceramic Analysis at Umm el-Jimal and Environs in Northeastern Jordan (1st to 20th Century AD)* (PhD Thesis). University of Southampton.
- UNESCO, 2024. Umm Al-Jimāl. *World Heritage List*. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1721/>